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Spin-Docs-at-Work Alert

White House Tries to Spin Clear of Excessive Foreign Travel Cost Revelation

White House Press Briefing, September 21: *Question: "Joe, what do you think of that study that three recent foreign trips by the President cost in excess of \$70 million? That sounds like a lot. Does it strike the White House that way?"*

Following the revelation yesterday by the General Accounting Office (GAO) that the cost of three recent overseas trips by President Clinton cost taxpayers a whopping \$72 million, the White House was confronted with questions. Ironically, the President was out of town — although in the country this time — when the deluge began. As usual, the White House spin machine kicked into overdrive. Too bad they didn't bother to check the "accuracy setting" on the machine before they started it. So, we thought we'd help them out.

What follows are White House press secretary Joe Lockhart's responses to questions about the GAO study examining the costs of three 1998 presidential trips to six African countries, to China, and to Chile that cost the American taxpayers at least \$72 million, and our supplemental facts.

Lockhart: *"The President has traveled — if you look at the previous President in the first term — less than President Bush."*

- Lockhart had to compare a first term with a first term because in a comparison of total days of travel between Clinton and his predecessor, Clinton has traveled 100 more days in his six-and-three-quarters years in office than did Bush in four.
- That translates to a Clinton travel rate of 27.6 days per year versus a Bush rate of 21.5 days per year.

Lockhart: *"And I think if you look at the costs, there is a high cost of providing physical security to the President when he's overseas. . ."*

- *Security costs are above and beyond what the GAO measured:* The GAO specifically excluded the security component of Clinton's travel: "These estimates exclude: (1) Secret Service expenses, which are classified. . ."
- No money is included for security costs in GAO's report. Just add in that "high cost of providing physical security to the President" – whatever you think it might be – to the bottom line.

Lockhart: *"Well, I think if you look at the report and look at the fine print — and I hope people do — you'll find that the vast majority of these costs are incurred for physical security. . ."*

- Obviously, Lockhart did not "look at the report and look at the fine print" because GAO's statement that it expressly excluded security costs from its estimate is found in the second paragraph of page 1.

Lockhart: *"The kind of costs incurred by this President over at DOD are very similar to the costs incurred by President Bush and President Reagan and previous presidents."*

- GAO informs us that they cannot provide comparative data with other presidents' travel because it is not available to collect. If Lockhart has such data, he did not get it from this report or any source known to exist by the General Accounting Office.
- What we do know is that Clinton is the presidential "Traveler-in-Chief": the travel days of any other president pale in comparison to his own (186 days out-of-country as of 9/20/99). The next most traveled (out of country) presidents are Bush (at 86 days) and Reagan (at 84 days), according to press reports and records kept by the Republican Policy Committee.
- As a point of comparison, President Clinton was out of the country at the American taxpayers' expense: 1993 — 8 days; 1994 — 31 days; 1995 — 19 days; 1996 — 21 days; 1997 — 33 days; 1998 — 45 days; 1999 (to date) — 29 days.
- On Clinton's three trips he was accompanied by a veritable army of assistants (also all at the American taxpayers' expense): Chile — 592 people total, 109 of them from the White House; China — 510 people with 123 from the White House; and Africa — 1,300 people with 205 from the White House.
- These three trips alone cost at least \$72.1 million — without factoring in the classified costs of the President's security (or all the lost work of the government employees, among other costs not factored in).

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